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# Poetic Absurdity:

## The Rise and Fall of Chairman Mao

By: Chris Creel

It is usually a gradual process. At least I think it should be, losing your world and accepting a different reality. Most people fade away, inoculated against thought by daily sitcoms. Most of America has been led into a collective unconsciousness by nationwide syndication. Looking into the TV we are all looking back. Each person on screen is a life we are more interested in than our own. We are in danger because our sitcoms stretch past comedy and into drama. Not only are their lives funnier than ours, but also their kisses are perfect, embraces profound, and hair in place (of their morals).

But it's all looking back and projecting their storyline onto our own dismal composition of fragmented memories. Perhaps we don't even know the pathetic manacles TV holds us to, but the Rational will hope for a time we break loose and are free. However, I am not a Rational, I am poetic. Revolution wasn't what I expected. That night I didn't want a change of mind—to begin again. That wasn't what I was thinking when I felt the bones break. I can't even say for sure I really felt them break. However, my body broke free and screamed out from the cinderblocks.

When I left Dallas to go visit college after 8 months away I was going back an uninspired shell of what walked off the stage on graduation day. Poems and poets, connections and people, kept me moving and alive in college. That had, of course, stopped there. Afterward memory and memories, speculation and stagnation kept me tied to my reclining chair. The life of high school teaching was left behind in a church 400 miles away when I drove down

to Houston.

For 8 months fluorescent lights shone on a room full of only boys, and I'm not Catholic. Those lights flash on and off 75,000 times a second. This accounts for the buzzing, migraines, and possibly for the momentary visions I try to fit in between the flickers. Students in navy pants and predictably untucked shirts walked around in circles never moving forward, only revealing in shoves, sarcasm, and anything except American Literature or progress. Once during an exam I swore I saw a girl in the back row. I don't know why this didn't strike me as odd. She looked eighteen, possibly a senior, with black hair flopping about in confused youthful ecstasy. Her short dress didn't seem out of place to me because I didn't notice anything else in the room. Under an incandescent glow she remained looking up at me. Her eyes didn't blink because the blue whirlpool seemed to radiate more permanently than anything else that should be in the sublunary world. She stood up and walked toward my desk. As each step swished her skirt back and forth, I fell more into the mesmerizing sway of her pendulum of thigh, skirt whipping past. The soft curves below her right calf gave me the peace of a white sand desert. She moved in the landscape and made it her own. Her lips quivered in front of me, but her eyes kept me steadfastly viewing her face surrounded by the horizon.

"Mr. Gallagher, do we turn our exams in here? Mr. Gallagher?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes. Here is fine," I said as I looked away from the institutional wall and toward the boy by my side: curly hair,



lint-covered pants, and probably raging hormones as well.

My life had been eight months of living at home and walking on polyester rugs. Excitement was when my tiger blanket was washed and the dust removed from the TV. My skin cells were constantly sloughing off and forming a nice gray snowfall all around. That was me on the bookcase and caught atop the fan blades. I sat with my back turned to the windows, away from everything except the clean TV. I refrained from sitcoms and other traps of the mind, but nonetheless the History Channel kept me locked in the sedentary life of benign war.

"And then Custer slaughtered 1000 Indians," said the portly gray haired man in a suit. I won't believe him though until I see a shot of screaming Indians or a computer simulation. Perhaps a pan over some old photograph with tomahawks useless on the stained ground will convince me of carnage. These shows take war, death, violence, and present them in a predictable series of snapshots, commentary, and reenactments. It's hard to keep from laughing at the actors of today running around screaming like long dead soldiers.

"And the Indians were not happy about this," said the man.

I tried to continue writing during this time, but I felt few poetic symphonies were ever created in a sunroom with a Jewish mother droning on about marriage and responsibility. Marriage is too far removed from my room, and dust-covered drowning in my own skin seems responsibility enough. My writing fell into a vicious cycle. The mind regurgitates and chokes when the stimulus of emotion is removed. My closest companion was an epileptic dog that shook like a children's toy every time lightning crashed. Angry but numb, my mind became like Venetian blinds broken closed—a mass-produced, failed expecta-

tion of perfection. This broken record went on from graduation in May until the New Year. Everything was still the same; I didn't even bother with resolutions.

My first trip back to Houston was to be for my best friend Matt's birthday. We met in the last two years of college and spent most of the year writing drunken poetry and effervescent ejaculations of life with loud screaming laughter and a complete disregard of tomorrow's class or tomorrow's problems. It was February and his 21st birthday. Never before had I left Dallas with 200 dollars of alcohol and the savage masochism usually exemplified by rock stars and select members of the press.

I stepped alone into my gray Nissan Stanza with dents along the passenger side door. It was always comforting to drive that car. The seats were old and stained with a montage of high school romances and flashes of clarity. They bucketed down and held you without judgment or deceit. It had become impossible for me to sit in the car without occasionally stroking the passenger seat on long drives. How easy it was to disappear into first kisses, last good-byes, and times when life actually mattered. The only thing new was the CD player, where Dylan whined through 1987 speakers which must have felt his original ballads lacking and took the liberty of adding extra inflections, rises, and caverns to sit and take shelter. The drive blurred into one continuous fence. I felt no comfort by the unification of my boundaries on both sides; God is not in some amalgamation of the outside world, but rather within.

The Texas highway was always changing, but I felt myself entranced by the subtle movements in the white fence posts and barbed wire as a dog entranced by his own shadow. Interstate 45 was a poor substitute for the back roads and mesquite trees of the hill country I had driven with my girlfriend in college. She was a freshman in my final



year and we were together my second semester and part way through the summer. She seemed fixed at the end of the highway, the horizon.

We broke up in summer, near the Fourth of July. All I remember was the light that fell on her face on that porch swing of Matt's house. He was staying in New Braunfels in a house overlooking the river flowing by in a crystal clear movement of spring-fed idealism. When she stood up, I sat speechless and watched the sunlight fill the empty chair. It had been blunt and unexpected for her to carry on and then drift off. Maybe if I recited Shakespeare or constructed a sonnet on the spot, told her that the sun was an illegitimate suitor unworthy of touching her skin so softly, or said anything besides "damn" as she walked down the steps and into her car, then she would have stayed. Perhaps the fact that I never got a reason caused me to attach all manner of things to our memories together. In some concoction of imagination she had become exalted in my mind. Each flip of hair and lasting glance persisted in my mind and weighed me down, pulling me slowly to a point where I couldn't breathe.

Contemplation is the essence of a man's dealing with women. We can only understand and appreciate when we look in the past. There is too much shit to deal with in the present, only in reflection can we attach our own sensibilities and make a sculpture of marble. One cannot contemplate the present; once you begin it is lost. However contemplation can only value and judge the past. The soft figurines created by a woman's shadow along a burnt orange wall can only gain permanence in reflection, the present forgets as soon as it begins. Women, beauty, would only exist as a phosphorescent sparkle and fade where it not for contemplation of that memory of that first glance. Her eyes would not illu-

minate the disparate abstractions of the distance were it not for me.

For the next three hundred miles I listened to the radio drone incoherently as I forced her out of my mind and focused solely on the white line and road ahead. But once during the drive I saw a pile of sand atop some pasture probably covered in a cow dung mosaic. Immediately I was on Galveston beach, March 30th 4am.

"Feel the sand, feel the breeze, feel the sun two hours away," I said breathing into the crashing whitecaps two miles from the flickering lights of offshore oilrigs.

"Feel the sand, correctly. Just leave your clothes here," Sarah said as she dropped her pants by vacillating line of shore. She spoke with action. Her muscles contracted in tune with the rhythm of the waves, the rhythm of her steps. I ran out just beyond knee depth to get a better view of her back arching around the wave at the apex of her jumps. She arose from the brown ocean, wet and cold, but hiding both and showing a light from her stare into me. We kissed, but didn't make love, we never did—I had to imagine it, then and now.

Around 6:30 I pulled into Houston and saw the sunset pink and orange with convoluted clouds filling my eyes. I read that the sunset looks like this because of the pollution. I didn't care. If we're going to be drowned in our own toxic gasses and other agents of asphyxiation...let it be beautiful, let it be orange and red with a touch of ocher.

Upon arrival, the first one to meet me was Byron. He was half balding and fully insane when I met him a year earlier. He walked in a shuffle step to the car looking like a lanky bean figure ordained with a recently acquired beer belly. He could always be counted upon for an emotional rant about some matter of philosophy or something else equally unimportant. However, the electricity, drive, and down-



pour of words was more than enough to make up for lack of any definite subject matter.

"I'm guessing you'll need help with that you elderly bastard." He smirked at the box in the back of my car.

"Yeah, this is the birthday present. I can't say it's cake exactly."

"Well I'd be glad to help you, but I am still age deficient. How have things been for you," he asked as I moved the box from the seat and into my arms.

"Ah, same shit different day. It's good to be back here though."

"I'm glad you're here. Ashton, this is a new time, new night, new experiences with people who have always been able to grab you," he said apparently half drunk. I was glad to be there, but felt little comfort in the distance of small talk as we walked side by side across the green and towards the dorm, my old dorm, with the architectural grace of a governmental monolith.

"What are you doing now, still finding comfort in your numbers?"

"Well, I gave up math and have gone to English. I guess I'm trying to be the sad bastard intellectual you always thought me capable of," he said with a cracked smile as he reached for the door.

Our plastic conversation was masking the pain he knew I felt being back here. It was no secret that only my final semester was enjoyable, my semester with him, Matt, and of course Sarah. But that was more valuable than four years of benevolent mediocrity. I didn't know if I wanted to see her or not. She would be a sophomore now, but even with time removed I could still feel her around me like Wisteria

climbing and grappling around my windpipe. It was still too early in the year for flowers.

I was three years older than her, but at twenty-two, there was a wall between the past and happiness. I wished that I could find some reversal or stoppage of time where I could go back, be free, and

be with her, live. Had I decided to stay around, maybe she would have stayed around. Instead, hopes of graduate school went out one thin envelope at a time. All I could do at such short notice was teach Catholic boys about the power of literature while I saw the

words rebound off of their world inundated with the collective anesthetization of television. Images are easy for the imagination. Words cower behind a soft black veil and preserve their stark white virginity, or rather subjectivity.

As I brought the boxes into the dorms, I walked slowly up the stairs and opened the door to a deluge of new faces that seemed caustic to my memories. But all that mattered was Matt and my final shot of youth. He was standing in the back of the room grinning in his tight white T-shirt, cowboy hat, and 21 years.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome to my room, my home, and my...my...ah, my shot for you," Matt slurred to me as he picked the bottle of vodka from the box I had put on the desk. His drunkenness procrastinated real discussion until tomorrow, and screamed of exfoliating any ingrained suffering: I indulged. I smiled and took the shot down feeling the burn of my throat causing a light cough and ritual squinting of the eyes. Afterwards were cheers for my

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return, salutations and raised glasses. I poured another shot and laughed at the thought of my students at home writing sober drafts after dinner. They then disappeared as if the fluorescent lights caught spontaneous fire and burned them out of my mind. The church rafters collapsed upon the children, nuns, priests and congregation.

From this point on I simply became an inebriated swell of emotion without direction. Cheap rum made my thoughts impotent of any satisfying direction. With each raised glass people began to blend into the white textured walls. The out-of-season Christmas lights became a white out. There was little talking that I noticed; any voices became malleable abstractions droning like a tenor sax. Jeff Buckley resonated from cardboard minarets.

*Lilac wine, I feel unsteady...Like my love.  
Listen to me, isn't that she, coming to me.  
Or am I just going crazy.*

Listening to the soft crescendo of the song, I felt him jump into the water outside of Memphis in '97. Not gasping for breath, but rather closing his eyes and forgetting. That must be what it's like to drown. You feel it possible to hold your breath, but then you swallow and accept.

With my next shot I walked into the hall and under the incandescent elliptical glow of the overhead hall light was permanent youth. Sarah's soft black hair contrasted with pearly skin and azure shirt. I don't know how she should have looked. The only impressions of her I had were the removed abstractions and additions of memory. I don't photograph women.

By this time there were three of her, but I walked to the most likely candidate of reality. I thought her breathing was palpable as I walked closer. She was standing outside the bathroom door with her hand softly placed on her hip in the expected disbelief of seeing my emotionally contorted face. This was the first time I had seen her

since she dissolved our relationship.

My mind's wanderings died down as I looked at the soft curvature of her neck pressed against the ribbed blue collar of her cotton shirt. She was a form presented in front of me. I'm sure there was a meaning. Mumbles came out when I tried to speak of my thoughts. I write

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poetry, but at this moment I was nothing but a diseased charlatan unable to speak with the eloquence I proclaim to have. The words, "I miss you," rebounded through my head but came out in jumbled syllables with the careless stupidity of a drunken postcard from a friend: "Glad you here, wish you beautiful."

"I didn't know you'd be here. I wish I had known, maybe then we could have talked," she said with the calculated redirection of a matador. I reached out to make her hair my elixir and to disappear into the security of the past, but at that moment the bathroom door opened.

"This is Tyler," she said. I didn't shake hands. "I'm sorry Ashton, but I can't talk now, maybe tomorrow. How long will you be here?" I stared. "Well, hopefully you can speak tomorrow." I glanced at her creature friend and saw a double image of some disfigured minotaur with coarse brown hair and a carefully pressed shirt over bulging



room. I grabbed five bottles and walked out the door. The beer splashed in the parking lot as the rainbow tosses came to an end just before the edge of a building. I sat and broke each one on the ground without any reason. Should catharsis have a reason? I had become a drone of drama. No grounding for my actions, none for emotions. I simply thought and acted accordingly, as the broken protagonist should.

Filling with frenzy I walked inside to purge tears and exorcize demons. When I opened the door to the first floor bathroom, inside were Sarah and this thing in some embrace. In my state it looked like cannibalism or some other debauchery that turned my mind into a rapture of emotion that felt like searing needles escaping through each and every pore of my skin. In my lucid anger I walked upstairs and saw Byron walking down the hallway. He looked frightened. Understandably so, I was enveloped in an escape from reason. I walked down the hallway not feeling the floor or seeing the walls. Each thought in my head resonated with futility and fury.

"Show something, leave something!" echoed something in me. I turned toward the wall and punched my hand into the cinderblock. The austere white turned red and my hand broke apart. I thought I punched once, I was later told it was five times. Everything went black and absent as I fell to the floor.

When I woke up in the hospital, the TV was on and CNN was talking about something of little importance. I turned it off and reclined in bed assessing my situation. I looked in shock at the bandage and supports mounted around my hand. Stupidity is not an easy feeling to couple with pain.

"Would you like red Jello or green," the nurse asked as she checked my pulse and other signs.

"What? Neither," I said.

"You have to eat, the doctor says you must eat." She said in a monotone talk that seemed to have the same inflections as the beeping of machines in my room.

"Your friends came, but it isn't visiting hours."

I drifted off from her talking and eventually she left. Looking down at my hand, I was at a loss for an explanation. Lying between sterile white walls and rigid sheets, I had little to do but use my good hand to push the button on the tower next to me releasing the morphine drip. I turned on the TV. When it came on I saw the History Channel discussing Mao Tse-Tung's communist reign.

"Born in a village of Shaoshan in the Hunan province, Mao was raised a peasant but became a leader," said the narrator, this time with a deeper, seemingly more poetic voice.

"Constant revolution, this was his answer. From the peasants comes the change. From the peasants comes revolution. To gain control of the country, Chairman Mao had to gain control of the countryside. Mao's wife being beheaded by the Nationalist Party of course sparked revolution, but Mao wanted constant revolution. He had all of his wives beheaded. In fact hundreds of wives were beheaded, all for the sake of the nation. They died proud and willingly for Mao," I heard as the voice drifted me off to sleep.